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Book Review: 'The Philosophy of the Church Fathers' by Harry A. Wolfson

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Harry A. Wolfson:
THE PHILOSOPHY OF THE CHURCH FATHERS *

FROM the outset, Professor Harry A. Wolfson's long-awaited *Philosophy of the Church Fathers* promised to be a major contribution to the rapidly expanding universe of patristic studies. Although the Fathers were primarily "sowers of the divine word," as St. Augustine once called them, it has become fashionable in recent times to study them as philosophers. Yet, except for Ueberweg-Geyer's standard work, *Die patristische und scholastische Philosophie,* now in its thirteenth edition, the first three chapters of Etienne Gilson's more popular *History of Christian Philosophy in the Middle Ages,* and some brief but suggestive pages added, *in extremis,* to Emile Bréhier's *Histoire de la philosophie,* there are few works dealing with the philosophy of the patristic period as a whole.

Before Professor Wolfson went to work, no one had attempted to treat the subject in a topical and exhaustive manner; any effort to fill this lacuna was thus bound to win the applause and gratitude of patristic scholars and historians of philosophy alike. The undertaking was all the more promising since the author is a distinguished and internationally known scholar. Until his retirement in 1958, he occupied the Nathan Littauer Chair of Hebrew Literature and Philosophy at Harvard for many years, and his extensive researches in the field of religious philosophy, which include an earlier work in two volumes on Philo (1947), acquainted him well with much of the intellectual background of the Fathers.

Lest the reader be misled by the title of the book, he should be warned that by "philosophy" Professor Wolfson, unlike most contemporary scholars, does not mean the body of purely rational truths that may be extracted from the works of the Fathers. As the subtitle "Faith, Trinity, Incarnation" suggests, his chief concern is with the

* *Volume I: Faith, Trinity, Incarnation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1956).

great dogmas of Christianity as found in the writings of the early ecclesiastical authors. The way he uses "philosophy" is more akin to the usage by many of the Fathers themselves when they contrasted their own philosophy or wisdom with the philosophy or wisdom of the pagans. It is akin to what the pagan adversaries of St. John Chrysostom meant when they questioned the value of "Christian philosophy" since many lukewarm catechumens postponed their baptism until the approach of death for reasons of self-interest (see *First Homily on the Acts,* PG 60:23).

More precisely, Professor Wolfson has chosen to deal with the theological formulation of Christian doctrines by means of concepts borrowed from pagan philosophy. His subject, in a word, is the rise of scientific theology during the first centuries of the Church, and as such it is a timely and important one. One may form some idea of the issues involved by pondering the following concrete example. When in his answer to Jesus' question: "But who do you say that I am?" St. Peter replied: "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Mt 16:15–16), he marveled at the wonder of Jesus; ever since, belief in His divinity and humanity has remained fundamental to all orthodox Christianity. Less than a century later, after the Docetists had questioned the reality of Christ's manhood, St. Ignatius of Antioch professed the same fundamental truth by saying: "There is only one physician, of flesh and of spirit, generate and ingenerate, God in man, true life in death, Son of Mary and Son of God, first passible then impassible, Jesus Christ our Lord" (*Ad Ephes.* 7). More elaborate than Peter's simple confession, this statement brings out clearly some of the implications of the primitive *kerygma,* of the good news of God's love, and represents one of the first attempts at theological inquiry.

Upon closer examination, however, it may be shown that St. Ignatius has hardly done more than bring together, within the compass of a single sentence, a number of ideas scattered throughout the books of the New Testament. His declaration may in turn be compared to the pronouncement of the Council of Chalcedon on the same subject: "In one and the same Christ . . . must be acknowledged two natures without commingling, without change, without division, inseparable . . . joined together in one Person and subsistence" (Denz. 148). One senses immediately that the definition of the Council is not a mere restatement of Scripture but a new formulation of its views on Jesus

of Nazareth, which draws extensively upon the technical vocabulary of contemporary philosophy. Whereas St. Ignatius had not used a single nonbiblical expression, none of the words in the lines just quoted occurs in Scripture, and all of them can be traced back to a definite source in Greek philosophy. By its formal precision, the Chalcedonian doctrine could satisfy the requirements of the philosophically trained mind and forestall future heresies. At the same time, there is little doubt, at least in the mind of a Christian, that this doctrine coincides with the teaching of the gospel concerning the dual nature of Christ.

Professor Wolfson is, of course, well aware of the fact that the Fathers were not of one mind on the status of pagan literature and learning in the Church. Many of the more conservative among them emphatically denounced all philosophers as the "patriarchs of heretics"; they viewed any *rapprochement* between the "wisdom of God" and the "wisdom of the world" as a reckless and perverse attempt to dilute the wine of the gospel with the water of secular philosophy. There is no denying that the misguided use of philosophy has often led to heresy. Nevertheless, it soon became apparent that the answer to a bad philosophy was not "No philosophy!" but a good one. In his onslaught against the philosophers, even Tertullian, the most outspoken representative of the antiphilosophic tradition, had refurbished and then used the arms of philosophy, thereby intimating that an adjustment between the rival claims of Jerusalem and Athens was possible.

The way in which the reconciliation was effected is examined by Professor Wolfson in the important chapters dealing with Alexandrian allegorism and the single and double faith theories. The metaleptic mode of interpretation, inherited from Philo, led Clement and Origen to discover in the secret and hidden teaching of Scripture the explicit teaching of philosophy itself. Agar, Abraham's Egyptian slave, and the foreign woman mentioned in Proverbs personify philosophy or encyclical culture (read the "liberal arts"), both now joyfully introduced into the fold as captives of Christ; the five barley loaves and the two fishes of the Gospels emerge as the Law of Moses and Greek philosophy, respectively. The author traces this nonliteral exegesis to the midrashic interpretation of the Old Testament employed by the rabbis of Palestinian Judaism and, through Philo, to the allegorical interpretation of the poets practiced by the Greek, especially the Stoic, philosophers. He has unfortunately neglected much of the new material made

available since the discovery of the Qumran scrolls, and in general has a tendency to undervalue the originality of Christian hermeneutics. He deserves much credit, however, for reminding us again that in the works of Philo, Origen, and their followers the spiritual sense of Scripture does not entail a rejection of the literal sense. His remarks will be appreciated even more if we recall that Dom Capelle once had to write a scholarly article in order to prove that St. Ambrose did not really mistake Abraham for God the Father.

The central portion of the book examines, at great length, what the author considers the three crucial mysteries of Christianity, namely, the Trinity, the Generation of the Son—which the Fathers were careful not to confuse with the generations of the pagan gods or with the Philonic belief in the creation of the *logos* from nothing—and the Incarnation. The work ends appropriately with a discussion of Gnosticism, defined by Wolfson as "the verbal Christianizing of paganism" (p. 503), and with a rapid survey of various heretical doctrines.

The foregoing remarks hardly suffice to give the reader an inkling of the rich diversity of Professor Wolfson's book. One can only admire the breadth of an undertaking that ranges from the New Testament authors to St. John of Damascus, the last of the Fathers, and that strives to set forth the doctrines of Christians and pagans, of orthodox writers and heretics, without undue simplification and in a language that remains sober and lucid throughout. Origen's remark that nothing "useless or superfluous" is to be found in sacred Scripture might apply to Wolfson himself. His erudition is staggering yet easy, there are no rhetorical trappings, no "niceties" of style. The formal structure of the book adheres to a uniform pattern: The author begins each section with a statement of his thesis, presented as a working hypothesis, which he proceeds to substantiate by means of numerous texts taken from the works of the Fathers. The results of the inquiry are then summed up neatly in the final paragraphs of each chapter.

Care has been taken to state the position of each author in his own terms. The quotations have been judiciously chosen for their illustrative value and, happily, no effort has been made to provide an exhaustive inventory of references, since such a catalogue would only have cluttered the exposition and obscured the drift of the argument. Nor is Professor Wolfson content with merely relating the contents of the works studied. Adopting what the Preface describes as a "hy-

pothetico-deductive method," he strives to reconstruct each author's thought, to bring out its latent implications, and to derive its significance. This task was all the more formidable since the diverse intellectual currents of the age tend to merge and constitute a kind of philosophic *koinē,* in which the individual components at times tend to lose their identity. As befits an endeavor of this kind, the tone is serene and unimpassioned from beginning to end. The author is obviously not interested in taking up cudgels against any of his colleagues; throughout his book he has left the spotlight squarely on the Fathers themselves.

Still one suspects that, for all its impeccable methodology, aided by a flair for the relevant which comes only with years of experience, all is not well with the state of Professor Wolfson's scholarship. He himself seems to have anticipated adverse criticism, for he has made a feeble attempt to forestall it in his Preface. Not all readers will agree that when St. Paul speaks of the Trinity he refers to a trinity existing after the Resurrection (see p. 167), that the idea of the Incarnation, conceived as a supernatural birth, is foreign to the Apostle (see p. 174), that he equates the pre-existent Christ with the Holy Spirit (see p. 175), that the difference between the Spirit who proceeds and the Son who is generated is only a verbal one (see p. 256), or that when Christian theologians call God "Father" in relation to the *Logos,* they imply that "He is its material cause" (p. 293). Because Christian writers speak of the Son as being generated by the Father, Wolfson hastily concludes that the Father enjoys a priority of nature, that there is a distinction of cause and effect between the Persons of the Trinity, and that the Persons differ specifically from one another (see pp. 308–309, 315). His desire to lay bare the inner meaning of certain texts sometimes leads him to read new meanings into them as when, in his account of the relation between the Father and the Son, he substitutes the word "cause" for the word "order," which the Fathers preferred for obvious reasons (see pp. 309, 330, 358).

Just what the author means by the pseudo-Aristotelian "specific genus" mentioned on several occasions in connection with the Trinity (see pp. 322, 325, *passim*) remains unclear to this reviewer. More sweeping still is his assertion that the work of the Fathers consisted in "recasting . . . Christian beliefs in the form of a philosophy . . . thereby producing . . . a Christian version of Greek philosophy"

(p. vi). He is on more solid ground when he begins to trace the steps by which the Fathers finally arrived at an adequate formulation of the dogma of the Incarnation, even if he has little or nothing to say about the idea that homogenizes most of what they wrote or thought concerning this mystery: God's abiding love for fallen man and His desire to rescue him from the power of the devil, of sin, and of death. According to Professor Wolfson, the union of the two natures in Christ "reduces itself to the use of the analogy of [the] Aristotelian conception of the unity of matter and form" (p. 373; cf. p. 407). But Aristotle's theory views matter and form as two incomplete substances combining in such a way as to constitute a single nature. As such it is essentially monophysitic, and one fails to see how it could be of much help in the present case. Recent studies have shown that the analogy employed by the Fathers is the Neoplatonic notion of "unconfused union," according to which two complete natures come together to form a single being without undergoing any alteration.

Unfortunately, Professor Wolfson devotes but little attention to Neoplatonism. This constant, almost systematic, neglect of the most important philosophical movement of the later patristic period may be one of the more serious shortcomings of his book. Equally worrisome is the total lack of concern for the form of the works studied. Patristic literature is like a coat of many colors and ranges all the way from popular sermons—intended for simple, not to say illiterate, audiences —to treatises of the highest scientific value. The Church fathers had understood from the start that they, too, must be all to all men. Just as Jesus had adapted His teaching to His listeners, so they made every effort to be understood by everyone. Truth in the end may be one, but it cannot be presented exactly in the same manner to all men. Indeed, as St. Augustine pointed out, certain truths should be withheld altogether from persons who, either through natural inability or lack of training, are incapable of grasping them properly and stand little chance of deriving any benefit from them. Not only error but truth itself can be harmful. Origen, who was not one to underestimate the power of folly, thought that to speak about God was always fraught with danger. The greater a man's respect for his hearers and for the truth, the more circumspect he will be when called upon to discuss grave issues before the general public.

All this is to say that it would be rash to expose an author's thought

without first determining where one should look for it. There is every reason to believe that the Fathers were far more subtle in their approach to the great theological truths than modern scholarship, on the whole, is willing to concede. A genuine appreciation of this fact might shed a flood of light on the would-be contradictions and inconsistencies with which they have often been taxed. Instead of searching their works for implications of which they themselves were unaware, Professor Wolfson could have devoted more time to uncovering the doctrines of which they were fully aware, even if, for prudential reasons, they felt obliged to present them under the subtle disguise of rhetoric. This reader, at any rate, would feel much more secure if he was convinced that the interpretations offered him rested upon a thorough and painstaking analysis of each work, and not merely upon a sampling of quotations wrested from their natural habitat, possibly disfigured or thrown out of focus by this very fact.

What the student who reads the early Christian writers as the first witnesses to a great and living tradition will resent even more is the merciless dissection to which their works have been subjected. Under Professor Wolfson's microscope, the Fathers, who were men of extraordinary vitality, are shed of all but the last drop of blood. Even such giants as Origen and St. Augustine emerge as skeletons, never to be restored to the unity of breathing life. Of the existential and confrontational aspects of their writings, not even the slightest hint is given. One may object that such aspects do not lie within the scope of the book. Still, given the dynamic quality of patristic literature, it is doubtful that the surgical operation performed by the author is fully justified. If this is the price of scholarship, it is a heavy one indeed. As long as the world of the Fathers continues to be haunted by the ghost of nineteenth-century *Wissenschaft,* it is not likely to arouse much enthusiasm in the heart of the modern reader.

Professor Wolfson knows this only too well, and he has long since resigned himself to it. He is a scholar writing for other scholars whose appreciation he has learned to value more highly than the plaudits of the multitude. His peers will admire his integrity as a researcher and the boldness of his enterprise. But, at times, they may disagree with his method; they may be quick to point out that some of his efforts have miscarried; on a number of unverified hypotheses they are likely to withdraw their vote of confidence; often they may be tempted to insert

his most valid remarks into an entirely different framework. In the end, all this may simply be another way of acknowledging their personal debt to him, and of proclaiming the value of his contribution to our knowledge of the intellectual aspects of the early Christian centuries.

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To Thee I Turn

When all within is dark,
And former friends misprise;
From them I turn to Thee,
And find Love in Thine eyes.

When all within is dark,
And I my soul despise;
From me I turn to Thee,
And find Love in Thine eyes.

When all Thy face is dark,
And Thy just angers rise;
From Thee I turn to Thee,
And find Love in Thine eyes.

(This gem of sacred poetry is by Solomon Ibn Gabirol, Spanish philosopher and poet of the eleventh century. The translation from the original Hebrew is by Israel Abrahams. The last stanza with its appeal from God's anger to His love is typical of Jewish mysticism.)